

Defense Picture: A Role for Rivers

By Marquis Childs

OF ALL the characters in the cast that will determine whether the United States is to spend \$30 billion to \$40 billion on an anti-ballistic missile system, none is more flamboyant — or unpredictable — than Rep. L. Mendel Rivers. The South Carolinian with the dramatic mane of silver hair and a manner to go with it is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

He might have come out of one of William Faulkner's novels of the Snopeses, the poor boy rising to power and position in the remnants of the aristocratic South. Seniority gave him his chairmanship and he exercises his power with the imperial touch. As for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, when he comes to Capitol Hill to testify the chairman looks on him frowningly as an emissary from a hostile power.

Rivers is planning the kind of mission to Puerto Rico that he led last January. He orders an Air Force plane—using Air Force planes to commute to Charleston and wherever the whim directs him he considers his prerogative—that will take a number of committee members to Ramey Air Force base near San Juan. There in early January they will plot the strategy to give McNamara his comeuppance.

THE REPUBLICANS with their victory of 47 seats in the House will carry far more weight in the committee than they did in the 89th Congress. If they decide to make the "anti-ballistic missile gap" a political issue it would be surprising not to find Chairman Rivers giving them tacit and perhaps open support. He led the committee last year in adding nearly \$1 billion to the defense appropriation that McNamara insisted the Defense Department did not need or want.

Committee members, most of them on the conservative side, are singularly susceptible to the pressures of big contractors who are part of what President Eisenhower called in his farewell address the military-industrial complex. In his zeal to keep the shipyards of his native state in operation Rivers has had a running battle with McNamara for approval of two nuclear-powered frigates. The frigates are still an angry gleam in Rivers' eye.

Understandably in view of the enormous complexity of the decision on the anti-ballistic missile, members of the committee with the best will in the world are likely to be swayed by emotions. The whole matter is shrouded in secrecy. The National Intelligence Estimate, revealing what the Soviets have done to place anti-ballistic missiles, is a top-secret document for the eyes of a half-dozen policymakers.

The story, so far as it is known, is as follows. About five and a half years ago the Russians began to build the sites for anti-ballistic missiles around their principal cities. After somewhat more than a year the operation was suspended. The reason for the suspension is conjecture—the possibility that they were devising more sophisticated devices for destroying incoming missiles at a much greater height and at a distance of several hundred miles from the target. Then a year ago they began to build a more extensive system.

McNamara will say only that despite rumors that the Soviet system is potentially more effective than any official is ready to acknowledge he considers the National Intelligence Estimate valid. On this basis he reaffirms his 1964 statement that there is no break in the stalemate foreseeable into the '70s. If either of the two scorpions should try a first-strike knockout the result would be death for both.

IT HAS been said on apparently good authority that the United States has undertaken at the highest level to assure the Soviets on the score of the anti-ballistic missile. If you don't build it, we won't.

But in the opinion of the most-seasoned Kremlinologists this has not prevailed against a deep and growing undercurrent of fear. Marshall D. Shulman of Harvard's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and an associate of the Russian Research Center there, wrote recently in *The Washington Post* after a stay in the Soviet Union that almost everyone he talked to believed the Johnson Administration was on a course of conquest. They simply did not credit the President with sincerity in his expressed desire to improve relations with the Communist world.

McNamara has always been confident that the United States with its fabulous productive system could afford whatever the nation's defense needs might be. He cannot escape seeing now, however, that the cost of the Vietnam War is cutting deeply into programs for domestic reform. And if on top of this \$5 billion or so a year is added for a Nike X system of questionable value the cuts will be even deeper.